

Speakout!

About Crime & Public Safety



THE GOVERNOR'S YOUTH PUBLIC SAFETY ADVISORY COUNCIL (GYPSAC)

SUMMARY REPORT & RECOMMENDATIONS



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

Office of the Governor

John W. Marshall
Secretary of Public Safety

Robert P. Crouch, Jr.
Chief Deputy Secretary of Public Safety
Barry R. Green
Deputy Secretary of Public Safety

November 8, 2004

Honorable Mark R. Warner
Governor of Virginia
State Capitol, Third Floor
Richmond, VA 23219

Dear Governor Warner:

Today's youth face more public safety challenges than ever, many of which can be found within their own communities, schools and back yards. Therefore, it is imperative we make it our priority to ensure that all of Virginia's students have the information and resources needed to stay safe and drug-free, wherever they are in the Commonwealth. That is why in 2003, at your direction, the Governor's Youth Public Safety Advisory Council, or GYPSAC, was given the charge to explore our youth's concerns and provide recommendations to help guarantee their public safety.

In order to accomplish this vital task, the Office of the Secretary of Public Safety and the Virginia Department of Education led a collaborative effort over the past year to provide a forum for our youth to identify their top public safety concerns, to analyze these concerns and, most importantly, to conjure solutions. Our young people are adept at citing public safety issues that concern them and proposing sound solutions that have the likelihood of succeeding. Throughout the following pages, you will find the consolidated efforts of more than 550 high school students. This report articulates the views and recommendations of GYPSAC participants and provides useful information to policymakers while drafting new safety initiatives in the Commonwealth. Each participant and school superintendent will receive a copy of the report.

GYPSAC would not have succeeded without the dedication of Jo Lynne DeMary, State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Virginia's school superintendents, Virginia Commonwealth University's Center for Public Policy and the Virginia Departments of Alcoholic Beverage Control, Criminal Justice Services, Emergency Management, Fire Programs, Juvenile Justice, Military Affairs, and State Police. Representatives of these agencies participated in the GYPSAC *Speakout!* sessions, providing expert insight for the most important participants of all – the student members of GYPSAC who demonstrated such a strong commitment to improving public safety. I have been deeply impressed by the hard work contributed to make this a learning experience for us all, and I hope that this program will serve as the beginning of a continuing dialogue between our youth and Virginia's public officials.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "John W. Marshall".

John W. Marshall

Governor Mark R. Warner's Message to the GYPSAC Summit in Richmond

"I want to thank everyone for being part of my Youth Public Safety Advisory Council. Thousands of your peers from all across Virginia, have just graduated from high school. This is a terrific accomplishment and a major milestone in a student's life. It is the time when young people open a new chapter in life with the chance to tap into many new and exciting possibilities. But unfortunately, not everyone who enters into high school as a freshman will walk across the graduation stage four years later—too often crime stands in the way. Whether students are the victims of crime or they become involved in criminal activity, we must do more to prevent crime from occurring in the first place. Whenever a crime is committed there are severe consequences, not only for the victims and perpetrators, but also for our schools and our communities. Now, how many times have we heard stories of violence in and around schools that we knew could have been prevented? How many times have people known something was wrong, but they were unable to connect the dots until it was too late? Sadly this happens all too often. That is why the work you have done so far and what you are doing today is so very important. And it is why I created the Governor's Youth Public Safety Advisory Council in the first place.

By speaking out while on this Council, sharing what you know with other student leaders, and communicating to me your biggest safety concerns and appropriate solutions, we can make Virginia a safer place. Through GYPSAC you can listen to your peers, develop positive behaviors and coping mechanisms, and learn from your shared perspectives about solutions that worked in each others communities. And when policies need to be changed, you have a forum where your voices can be heard. With your help we can make our neighborhoods and communities safer for all Virginians, no matter where they live.

It is my hope that you will be able to speak with one voice about the top ten safety concerns affecting young people in the Commonwealth today. If you are able to accomplish this, then you will have made a tremendous contribution. GYPSAC marks the first time in recent memory that a statewide youth forum has been organized with the goal of making a direct impact on public policies, laws and safety conditions in Virginia. This is your chance to speak out and be heard, and I promise that your voices will be heard by those who make public policy choices for our Commonwealth."

—June 30, 2004-Science Museum of Virginia



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PURPOSE OF GYPSAC

The Governor's Youth Public Safety Advisory Council (GYPSAC) is Governor Mark R. Warner's initiative to ensure that Virginia's youth have a voice in addressing the public and personal safety concerns that most directly affect them. The council is sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Public Safety, with the assistance of the Governor's Office for Substance Abuse Prevention (GOSAP), and in cooperation with the Virginia Department of Education. Since 2003, the Governor has charged GYPSAC with four goals:



- Advise the Governor and Secretary of Public Safety on emerging issues and solutions concerning their safety,
- Develop solutions that youth can implement in their communities, schools and homes,
- Compile and distribute information gathered at GYPSAC meetings to increase public awareness of the public safety challenges facing our youth, and
- Improve communication between the Commonwealth's residents and the Secretary of Public Safety regarding public safety issues.

To accomplish these objectives, Secretary of Public Safety John W. Marshall gathered students for six collaborative sessions in Fairfax, Farmville, Richmond, and Roanoke to foster communication on important safety issues. More than 550 high school-aged youth, representing 79 high schools throughout the Commonwealth, participated in GYPSAC events. These activities included one of three, one-day *Speakout!* sessions, a GYPSAC Summit, a meeting at the Bon Air Correctional Juvenile Facility and a session at the Youth Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention Project Conference (YADAPP). During these gatherings students voiced their opinions and concerns about public safety issues in their schools and communities. They also had the opportunity to ask questions of professional safety representatives from the Virginia Departments of Alcoholic Beverage Control, Criminal Justice Services, Education, Emergency Management, Fire Programs, Juvenile Justice, Military Affairs, Public Safety, and the Virginia State Police, all agencies that sent representatives to the events. At each session, participants were challenged to respond to the following questions that now form the basis of this report:

- What are the most critical public safety issues affecting you and your friends?
- What are the underlying causes of these public safety issues?
- What are potential solutions that could be implemented to keep youth safe?

"I enjoyed having discussions with other students because it was a lot more open."

—Fairfax GYPSAC participant

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HOW VIRGINIA'S YOUTH WERE HEARD

Virginia's Superintendent of Public Instruction, Dr. Jo Lynne DeMary, encouraged the Commonwealth's school superintendents to each nominate up to four students, representing a cross-section of youth in their communities, to participate on GYPSAC. With the hope they would return to their districts and share their insights with their schoolmates and others in the community, rising sophomores and juniors were targeted for participation.

Participants at the initial *Speakout!* sessions held in Fairfax, Richmond and Roanoke completed a brief survey prior to convening in order to help identify the most important public safety issues affecting Virginia's youth. The results served as a foundation for the one-day *Speakout!* sessions. Each meeting was structured to maximize youth participation. Facilitated exercises were used to encourage constructive dialogue and solicit opinions and suggestions from all participants. Secretary Marshall opened each session and outlined how the information generated would be used to inform policymakers on matters of concern to youth. In addition, GYPSAC participants were able to meet and ask questions of professionals working in the public safety arena.

The Fairfax *Speakout!* differed from the Richmond and Roanoke sessions in one aspect. At the request of the participants, two youth volunteers facilitated a 30-minute discussion without the presence of agency staff or other adults. They used this time to reflect upon previously identified critical safety issues and to generate a prioritized list of their top five concerns. This information was used in future exercises to spark discussions about critical safety issues. Each *Speakout!* session concluded with participants completing evaluations of the meeting in order to inform upcoming GYPSAC events.

In addition to the *Speakout!* sessions, the GYPSAC convened a summit meeting in June 2004 at the Science Museum of Virginia in Richmond. The meeting brought together participants from the three previous GYPSAC *Speakouts!* as well as new attendees. In July 2004, additional input was received from the school students who attended the Youth Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention Project Conference (YADAPP). Approximately 20 YADAPP youth leaders received training to facilitate small groups of YADAPP participants and generate additional ideas.

The final GYPSAC event was held at the Bon Air Juvenile Correctional Center. The Governor's Office for Substance Abuse Prevention (GOSAP) worked in coordination with Bon Air's Superintendent, Linda McWilliams, to identify 15 high school-aged volunteers to participate in a small group session. Participants were challenged to answer the same three questions that the original Council members tackled, as well as "What would have made a difference to you as you were growing up?" The results from this session provided useful insights into possible preventative initiatives for especially high-risk youth.

"It gave me the ability to voice my opinion to people who actually had power in office."

—Richmond GYPSAC participant



Secretary of Public Safety John W. Marshall addresses a student's questions.

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TOP TEN SAFETY CONCERNS OF OUR YOUTH

Virginia's youth identified the most critical public safety concerns affecting them and their peers through various facilitated activities conducted at all GYPSAC sessions. Following the discussions, staff analyzed the responses to determine the most commonly raised themes throughout the sessions. Following were the ten most frequently cited safety issues arising from all six youth forums:



"I was able to share my pressing safety issues."

—Roanoke GYPSAC participant

1. **Physical violence**, often associated with gang activity, including the use of guns and other weapons
2. **Substance abuse**, from marijuana and crack cocaine, as well as over-the-counter medications
3. **Underage drinking** by students
4. **Reckless driving**, including speeding, drag racing and driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs
5. **Unprotected sex**, contributing to the spread of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, as well as teenage pregnancy
6. **Racism**, which often leads to violence
7. **Harassment** of students and social cliques through bullying and sexual intimidation
8. **Tobacco use** by underage youth
9. **Theft** of personal property
10. **Vandalism** of school property, personal property and community facilities

CONTRIBUTING CAUSES

After GYPSAC participants identified the most critical public safety concerns affecting them and their peers, they were charged with exploring the causes contributing to these safety issues. Participants who attended the GYPSAC Summit, YADAPP session and Bon Air meeting focused the majority of their efforts on identifying the underlying causes of illegal or inappropriate youth behaviors and providing recommendations to address them. Following were commonly cited factors:

- **Absence of positive role models** and adult guidance
- **Boredom** as a result of limited positive activities in schools and communities
- **Distorted media images** glamorizing unsafe and violent behavior
- **Easy access** to alcohol and drugs by underage youth
- **Intolerance of differences** among youth and an inability to step outside of comfort zones to develop an acceptance of others
- **Inconsistent enforcement** of rules and regulations at schools
- **Lack of knowledge** regarding sex and its consequences
- **Low self-esteem**, insecurity and a strong need for peer acceptance
- **Stress and depression** among high school-aged youth



"I was able to see that others my age truly do have these concerns on their mind and want to get them resolved."

—Richmond GYPSAC participant

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GYPSAC'S RECOMMENDATIONS AND STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING YOUTH SAFETY

The Secretary of Public Safety asked GYPSAC participants to take on an additional task upon completion of their initial charge of identifying youth safety issues. Secretary Marshall challenged GYPSAC to propose functional solutions that youth can implement in their communities, schools and homes. Participants proposed and analyzed relevant solutions to combat the underlying causes of public safety threats. The following recommendations reflect the most frequently discussed solutions or strategies offered at the GYPSAC forums.

Increase Positive Role Models and Adult Guidance

- Expand opportunities for older teens to serve as positive role models who mentor younger students.
- Use peers as speakers to provide positive, inspirational messages.
 - Provide educational programs for youth and parents to help them understand each others needs.
 - Support community groups that increase contact between youth and caring adults, such as neighborhood youth centers and other organizations.
 - Increase peer mediation and similar programs that provide alternative models of behavior for youth.
 - Create community-facilitated family events in clubs, churches or other organizations, in order to bring together parents and youth in positive ways.
 - Provide parenting classes, teen mother mentoring programs and other parent support activities in order to strengthen family relationships.
 - Increase opportunities for teens to speak with adults who will listen and offer support without judgment.

“The best thing about GYPSAC is that we may actually be making a difference with these ideas.”

—Richmond GYPSAC participant

Diminish Boredom and Increase Positive Activities

- Increase the number and accessibility of diverse after-school activities, including those that focus on a variety of interest groups, hobbies, clubs and sports.
- Conduct special school-sponsored evening events, such as parties and dances.
- Increase the number of community recreational centers offering programs for youth, such as sports, field trips, dances, board games, movie nights, concerts, dances and talent shows. Use local parks and recreation agencies to provide supervision and guidance.
- Hold community cookouts, block parties and other community-based social events.
- Encourage community improvement projects and fundraising activities for special events so that people come together in positive ways.
- Increase employment opportunities for youth between the ages of 15 and 17.

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Combat Distorted Media Images

- Encourage radio and television stations to increase positive messages and restrict negative messages directed toward youth.
- Restrict images shown to youth that portray smoking, drinking and other potentially harmful activities.
- Create media regulations which require that youth and parents be better informed about content before programs are aired.
- Air television shows with mature content later in the evening and increase the use of parental blocks.
- Develop more youth-run local television and radio shows.

Eliminate Access to Drugs and Alcohol

- Strengthen penalties for individuals that use or distribute drugs and alcohol to underage youth.
- Create harsher penalties for establishments that sell alcohol and tobacco to youth.
- Enhance public outreach and education programs that discuss the dangers of using illegal substances.
- Hold parents more accountable if their children are caught with illegal substances.
- Increase the number of law enforcement and ABC personnel who monitor sales to minors.
- Increase the number and improve accuracy of identification checks.
- Establish easier ways for youth and others to report individuals who provide illegal substances to minors.
- Increase the number of youth groups, such as Students Against Destructive Decisions, Drug Abuse Resistance Education, Students Without Drugs or Alcohol and the Youth Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention Project, in order to provide more youth with information and alternatives.
- Use inspirational speakers who overcame personal substance abuse problems in order to convey the dangers and how they may be avoided.



"I liked being able to voice my opinions and discuss safety issues that are important to me in my school."

—Roanoke GYPSAC participant

Build Understanding and Acceptance of Others

- Provide opportunities for youth from different cultures and social groups to interact through clubs, study groups and cultural festivals.
- Increase the use of peer mediators to resolve disputes between groups.
- Offer classes in school which broaden the knowledge about various races and cultures, and provide opportunities for students to discuss racial and cultural issues in schools.
- Develop cross-cultural mentorship programs.

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Strategies to Reduce Gang Activities

The threat of physical violence, often associated with gang activity, was the most frequently mentioned public safety threat during the *Speakout!* sessions. As a result, participants at the GYPSAC Summit and YADAPP session were asked to recommend strategies for addressing gang violence and related activities. These suggestions are highlighted below.

- Provide positive, successful role models to speak with students.
- Establish mentorship programs that help develop self-esteem and self-respect.
- Develop youth leadership programs in schools.
- Create positive media images and programs that are absent of violence, drugs and alcohol.
- Increase law enforcement involvement in school activities by offering programs, such as Scared Straight, to inform students about the consequences of breaking laws.
- Generate employment opportunities for youth.
- Enhance community recreational facilities and offer affordable programs for youth.
- Increase the availability and diversity of after-school activities.
- Hold community festivals and other events which break down social barriers within communities.
- Improve cultural literacy through school classes and programs that provide education on various cultures.
- Promote opportunities for students to talk and problem-solve with supportive, nonjudgmental adults.
- Help families resolve issues before they require intervention by law enforcement or social services.
- Provide support services to at-risk youth, including counseling, legal, and substance abuse services.

Making it Happen

The strategies and recommendations made in the preceding pages are presented because they express the most frequently offered ideas and approaches to workable solutions that emerged from the GYPSAC work sessions. By developing this new “voice of Virginia’s youth” GYPSAC members have made a valuable contribution to the ongoing public discourse about crime and safety issues from their own unique perspective. Ultimately, all Virginians stand to benefit from the work of these young, bright minds.

In keeping with the Governor’s assurance to GYPSAC members, the Office of the Secretary of Public Safety will ensure the wide distribution of this document to policymakers, educators, law enforcement officials and, of course, to the GYPSAC parents and students. This is the first step toward ensuring this voice is active and available wherever and whenever program initiatives aimed at improving the safety of Virginia’s young people are considered. This document demonstrates clearly what Governor Warner knew from the very start of GYPSAC – that Virginia’s youth want to contribute in positive ways toward ensuring their own safety, and that they will enthusiastically provide creative input and practical insight – in their own inimitable way – if we but ask it of them. We did. They did. Now, let’s all put their ideas to work!

“I was able to share concerns about what happens in our schools and also providing adults in the government input about what to do.”

—Roanoke GYPSAC participant

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*Special thanks to the following groups for their contributions
to the Governor's Youth Public Safety Advisory Council throughout 2003 and 2004:*

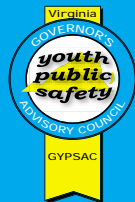
Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control
Department of Criminal Justice Services
Department of Education
Department of Emergency Management
Department of Fire Programs
Department of Juvenile Justice
Department of Military Affairs
Virginia Commonwealth University
Department of Virginia State Police

and especially to the students, principals and superintendents representing the following high schools:

Amelia High School
Arcadia High School
Atlee High School
Bon Air Juvenile Correctional Center
Booker T. Washington High School
Brentsville Senior High School
Broad Run High School
Brooke Point High School
Brookville High School
Caroline High School
Central High School
Charlottesville High School
Colonial Forge High School
Culpeper County High School
Denbigh High School
Dominion High School
Fairfax County Public Schools
Forest Park Senior High School
Franklin High School
Garfield Senior High School
George Mason High School
Giles High School
Greensville County High School
Hampton High School
Hanover High School
Harrisonburg High School
Henrico High School

Heritage High School
Hylton Senior High School
James River High School
James Wood High School
Jeb Stuart High School
John F. Kennedy High School
John Handley High School
John Marshall High School
Lancaster High School
Lee-Davis High School
Lord Botetourt High School
Loudoun Valley High School
Manassas Park High School
Maury High School
Meadowbrook High School
Menchville High School
Millbrook High School
Mount Vernon High School
New Kent High School
Norcom High School
Northumberland High School
Norview High School
Nottoway High School
Orange County High School
Osborn Park Senior High School
Park View High School

Petersburg High School
Phoebus High School
Potomac Falls High School
Prince Edward High School
Prince George High School
Rockbridge County High School
Salem High School
Sherando High School
Smithfield High School
Stone Bridge High School
Stonewall Jackson High School
Strasburg High School
Surry County High School
T.C. Williams High School
Tabb High School
Thomas Dale High School
Thomas Jefferson High School
Turner Ashby High School
Warren County High School
Warwick High School
West Point High School
Windsor High School
Woodbridge Senior High School
Woodrow Wilson High School
Woodside High School
York High School



THE GOVERNOR'S YOUTH PUBLIC SAFETY ADVISORY COUNCIL
GOVERNOR'S OFFICE FOR SUBSTANCE ABUSE PREVENTION

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Enhance Consistency of Rule Enforcement in Schools

- Provide training, evaluation, incentives and rewards to encourage strict enforcement of rules by school administrators.
- Foster interaction and understanding between students and school administrators through joint participation in after school activities.
- Advance dialogue between youth and authorities to help youth understand the roles and responsibilities of those in charge and the consequences of breaking the rules.



Boost Self-Esteem and Reduce Negative Peer Pressure

- Encourage parent involvement in youth activities to improve communication and increase understanding.
- Promote the use of peer mediation and mentoring programs to build supportive relationships.
- Increase the availability of youth leadership development programs.
- Help youth become involved in activities in which they can experience success.

Lower Youth Stress and Depression

- Improve youth access to counseling services, including drug and alcohol abuse services.
- Increase information and outreach to help youth access needed services.
- Expand school electives for students to help them find areas where they can excel and thus, graduate on time.

"I met awesome people that inspired me to make a change."

—Richmond GYPSAC participant

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